

The FA NCO: Absolutely Mission Essential

The US Army always has benefited from NCOs who could and did display initiative, make decisions and seize opportunities that corresponded with the commander's intent. These qualities are more important than ever in an Army at war. Despite technological improvements and increased situational awareness at every level, the NCO must make decisions that take advantage of fleeting opportunities on the battlefield.

Today, our Field Artillery (FA) NCOs face challenges that are unlike any in our past. FANCOs are executing the full spectrum of operations—that means stability, support, offense and defense operations. And never before have our battlefields been more decentralized, our enemy more ruthless, and never have we had more potential for our NCOs to determine our success as a branch and an Army.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, we truly live in the era where tactical action by FA NCOs may have strategic consequences. To all our NCOs in the fight—make no mistake—your actions *do* have impact. You not only affect those serving on your left and right flank today, but also your fellow FA NCOs who will follow you in future rotations.

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The FA Mission. What we have learned after seven years of combat is that FA and our NCOs are *absolutely* essential to the success of our joint forces and the Army's combined-arms team—and will continue to be in the future. The requirement for indirect fire systems to support the US Army across the full spectrum of operations, 24 hours a day, seven days a week—regardless of the weather—continues. That requirement is legitimate and must be met.

Combatant commanders are relying more and more on the precise and lethal fires that Field Artillerymen can deliver in both theaters of operation. We now have the ability to deliver devastating fires with pinpoint accuracy, using both cannons and rockets. Additionally, commanders are relying heavily on FANCOs

By CSM Joseph D. Smith, FA

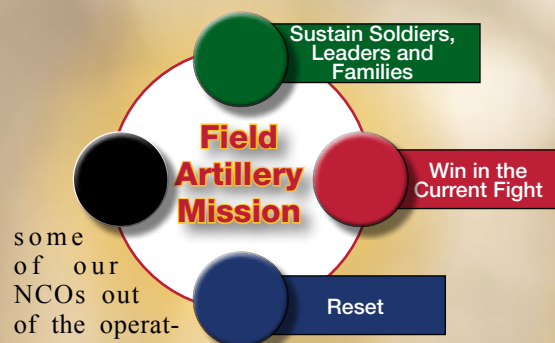
to plan, coordinate and synchronize nonlethal fires at all levels.

FA Soldiers are performing brilliantly in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa and several other countries around the globe. They are performing traditional and nontraditional FA tasks. These tasks include convoy security, counterinsurgency offensive missions, intelligence gathering, logistical support, forward operating base security and unmanned aircraft systems operations to mention a few. These Soldiers fully understand they are ambassadors representing their country as well as the US Army. It continues to amaze me how much we ask of these fine men and women—and how well they respond to every task. However, their determined efforts and success have come with a price.

Core Competency Retraining. We are experiencing a decline in FA core competencies due to both deploying repetitively on nonstandard missions and increasing our skill sets to include nonlethal fires. The FA leadership recognizes that, to maintain the excellence of our FA NCOs and Soldiers, we must take efforts to address the atrophy in our core competencies. Our NCO corps is the envy of professional militaries around the world; others can see the tremendous value of our NCOs' leadership in current operations. Therefore, we are pursuing initiatives aggressively at the Fires Center of Excellence, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, to regain our edge.

Mobile Training Teams. First, mobile training teams (MTTs) will play a more significant role in the "re-Redding" of our NCOs to conduct collective training on FA tasks. MTTs are really a growth industry for us due to the operational tempo and short reset periods between deployments. MTTs represent a capability that is required today because of the War on Terrorism (WOT). It is important to understand that if we truly believe in educating our NCOs, we must subscribe to the notion that we have to provide that education at all costs.

Thus far, we have succeeded in taking



some of our NCOs out of the operating force to send them all over the world to conduct training for our FANCOs. Our MTTs focus on providing training to NCO leaders in all of our military occupational specialties. The MTTs are designed to train the trainer and to develop subject matter experts in each area so our units can regain their core skills.

Second, we are using MTTs to meet our NCO Education System (NCOES) demands to ensure relevance to present and future operations. There are many factors of current operations that impact our ability to train and educate our NCOs. Because of WOT and deployment schedules, it is difficult to get all of our NCOs into resident NCOES classes. MTTs will play a much greater role in meeting this demand. For example, one of our MTTs focuses specifically on the Master Gunner and the criticality of this position.

Master Gunner Training. The mission of the FA Master Gunner Course at Fort Sill and its MTT course is to train senior FA NCOs to plan, assess and evaluate Artillery training. The course has three modules—Training Management, Maintenance Training and Advanced Gunnery Training—which are sequenced progressively and interdependent of each other. The course focuses on safety, training management, advanced gunnery training, small arms weapon systems, integration of training devices, assessment of units and the development of FA certification programs to sustain and improve unit proficiency. All of these training modules are designed to address our core skills, and leaders who receive this training will be a tremendous asset to their units.

Specifically, we know the Master Gunner is the commander's and command sergeant major's (CSM's) weapons system expert on training, safety, ammunition, resupply and maintenance operations. He is assigned to the S3 section to

help train and certify crews, maintain the operational status of primary weapons systems and conduct certifications of unit commanders and leaders on weapons and digital fire direction systems. He also may train newly arrived Soldiers on the unit's particular weapons system(s). Thus, the Master Gunner is a critical member of the battalion's team to reestablish our core proficiencies.

The FA School recommends the Master Gunner—active duty or Army National Guard—be a sergeant first class and have at least one year's experience as a firing or ammunition platoon sergeant. It is also recommended he be a Battle Staff NCO Course graduate. This gives him the knowledge to provide logistical support for the close fight on today's battlefield as well.


Combined with his experience as a platoon sergeant, the course enhances his abilities to provide the battalion commander and CSM the accurate, detailed information they need to ensure the unit is trained and ready. During field operations, the Master Gunner can be an additional planner in the battalion tactical operations center.

Thus, the importance of MTTs to help FA Soldiers regain some of our core proficiencies will continue for the foreseeable future. I encourage units to take advantage of the training provided by these MTTs as they reset upon return to home station and as they prepare to execute future deployments.

I am confident that our FA NCOs will continue the fight with professionalism and discipline, and I am certain our reliance on our NCOs will lead to success. I challenge our FA NCOs to carry forward this noble tradition—established by NCOs of years past and still alive in the men and women who proudly fight today. Our Army and the Field Artillery depends on it.

*Anticipate—Integrate—Dominate!
Artillery Strong!*

Command Sergeant Major (CSM) Joseph D. Smith, Field Artillery (FA), is the FA CSM at the Fires Center of Excellence, Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Previously he was the CSM for the 434th FA Brigade (formerly the FA Training Center) at Fort Sill. He served as the CSM for 3rd Battalion, 6th FA (1-6 FA) at Fort Drum, New York; the CSM for 1-15 FA at Camp Casey, South Korea; and the CSM for 1-82 FA at Fort Hood, Texas. He also served as the CSM for 3-6 FA at Fort Drum, deploying in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.



SGT John Ray, B Battery, 5th Battalion, 25th Field Artillery Regiment, 4th Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, patrols Karadah, Baghdad, Iraq, 19 March. (Photo by SSG Jason T. Bailey, 1st Combat Camera Squadron)